PR
4809
H1.8
R4
1916

CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

THE
ANNA S. GURLEY
MEMORIAL BOOK FUND
FOR THE PURCHASE OF BOOKS
IN THE FIELD OF THE DRAMA
THE GIFT OF
WILLIAM F. E. GURLEY
CLASS OF 1877
1935

Cornell University Library
PR 4809.H18R4 1916

The return of Alcestis, a play in one act

3 1924 013 485 770

olin

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924013485770

The Return of Alcestis: A Play in One Act: by Laurence Housman

Samuel French: Publisher

28-30 West Thirty-eighth Street : New York

LONDON

Samuel French, Ltd.

26 Southampton Street Strand

PRICE TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

The Return of Alcestis: A Play in One Act: by Laurence Housman

Samuel French: Publisher
28-30 West Thirty-eighth Street : New York
LONDON
Samuel French, Ltd.
26 Southampon Street Strand

Copyright, 1916, by LAURENCE HOUSMAN

CAUTION.—Amateurs and Professionals are hereby warned that THE RETURN OF ALCESTIS, being fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States, is subject to royaly, and any one presenting the play without the consent of the author or his authorized agent, will be liable to the penalties by law provided. Application for the right to produce THE RETURN OF ALCESTIS must be made to SAMUEL FRENCH, 28–30 West 38th Street, New York City.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

THE RETURN OF ALCESTIS.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE.

ALCESTIS
HER NURSE
HER DAUGHTER
HER ATTENDANTS
CHORUS OF WOMEN
ADMETUS
PHERES (*his father*)
EUMELOS (*his son*)
HIS ATTENDANT
CHORUS OF MEN
HYMEN

THE RETURN OF ALCESTIS

SCENE:—*A chamber in the house of* ADMETUS, *King of Pherœ. Across the center, backed by pillars, stretches a high screen, with curtained entrances at back to right and left. Before it stands the bridal couch, in front of which is a chair facing the audience. Down-stage at center, on a lower level, is the domestic altar. By the altar stands* HYMEN *bearing a torch.*

HYMEN.—
House of Admetus, whom the Gods befriend,
Peace be within your gates, and joy attend
On this day's bridal! For now Pheres' son,
Helped by the hand of Heracles, hath won
Back from the tomb his wife, who blameless died
That he might live; and, to reclaim his bride,
Comes now where, lo, the nuptial feast is spread.
So shall fruit crown once more the marriage-bed,
And to his loins give sons, and thence make strong
The breed of his great race; for whom, when song
Was hushed in Heaven, Phoebus, the sun-bright God,
Did shepherd-service, and inglorious trod
These walls within. To him the God then gave
This promise, that he should not see the grave,
If, of free-will, one, offering in his stead,
Rendered the debt. So passed she to the dead:
But comes again upraised. Therefore, 'tis meet
That they which mourned should dance, and mouths make sweet

Music about this chamber, decked and dight
For fruitful wedlock: whereto I bring light,
And warmth, and blessing. So may surer bliss,
And through long years, attend the marriage kiss,
Which here now is to be.

(*Exit* HYMEN. *Enter* CHORUS OF WOMEN.)

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.—
As the springs, and the rains, and the rivers
Of hills, that replenish the earth,
Sink and are lost, yet rise and return
To the land of their birth;
And freshen with streams and showers
All herbs and flowers
Which yearn:
2ND SEMI-CHORUS.—
So thou, O fairest of givers,
Life-bringer, light-bearer to men,
With hands most tender to save,
And face by the terrors of death
Unappalled, and by love made brave,
1ST SEMI-CHORUS.—
And with lips for the spending of breath
More quick than the lips of a runner
Whose feet are set to the goal:

(*Enter* NURSE *bearing wedding raiment.*)

CHORUS.—
So thou, our dearest and best,
Art risen again from the grave;
And the land at thy coming is blest.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS.—
And for thee, befriended of fate,
My grief and sorrow were vain;
So with joy in my heart I wait,
Till eyes behold thee again.
CHORUS LEADER.—

Nurse of our mistress, wherefore dost thou stand
Silent before us, holding in thy hand
The wedding raiment? Dost thou not hail the day?

(*The* NURSE *lets fall the raiment.*)

Oh! What means this?
NURSE.—
That having naught to say
Of good, I would be mute!
LEADER.—
From what black bough of evil falls that fruit
Of speech so darkly uttered?
NURSE.—
Peace, let be!
The Gods drive home their gift. Soon shall ye see
Our mistress come forth to your midst again.
LEADER.—
Redeemed from death?
NURSE.—
Yea, for she lies not slain.
LEADER.—
Thy words sound strange!—But living, thou hast said?
NURSE.—
Aye, surely living, since she is not dead.
LEADER.—
Speak, mother: hast thou aught to tell of woe?
NURSE.—
Ye women, I speak only as I know.
She that was dead now lives: gracious of form,
Gentle of face is she; her hands are warm
To my hands holding them; she feels no pain;
Death on her beauty has not left a stain;
But pure, but perfect, as on the day she died,
So have I found her,—lovely as when a bride
First came she to this chamber of our lord.
LEADER.—
All that thou sayest is good!

NURSE.—
I speak no word,
Women, but as I know. Ah! God, these eyes
Which knew her as a child!—They that be wise,
Dying, let them stay dead!

(*Exit* NURSE.)

LEADER.—
O Women, all ye that have heard,
What comfort find ye in this word——
'Let the dying stay dead'?
CHORUS.—
Earth is old, Time is long,
And the days that we live are few.
Many arise, and are born,
They mount and wax strong,
Stand thick together like corn;
But to them death cometh anew.
They are reaped, and are borne to the grave:
Men know them no more.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS.—
Yet a gift from the Gods was breath,
Not a curse, O sister, O friend!
For the search of my heart hath shown
How life is sweet to the taste;
And the sorrow that waits in the end
For the feet which haste
Is death!
God gave me a little breath:
Shall I not cleave to it now?

(*Enter* ALCESTIS *leaning upon the hands of* WOMEN, *and accompanied by her* NURSE. *They seat her upon the throne. She remains motionless.*)

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.—
And thou, that returnest to earth,
For our lord's delight, and this land's,

Is there no light on thy brow,
No warmth in thy hands,
No gladness of heart, when thou hearest
The voice of our mirth?
2ND SEMI-CHORUS.—
Lo, robes for the bridal thou wearest,
Though a shroud was thy robe of late;
And home, O Beloved and fairest,
Thou comest, redeemed from Fate.

(*A pause.* ALCESTIS *makes no response.*)

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.—
Ye say that the world is old:
But spring and the years are young,
And summer to earth gives joy.
Surely to man, not alone
For grief, hath this tale been told,
When the song of the bridal is sung
In the heart of maiden and boy?
NURSE.—
O women, speak to her! Let living fruit
Be on your tongues! These lips to me are mute,
And the eyes know me not!
LEADER.—
How hath it come?
NURSE.—
Death's hold is loosed; but mouth and heart stay dumb.
Lo, from the grave she looks, yet sees not life!
LEADER.—
What woe thou tellest! Shall not the name of wife
Or mother move her?
NURSE.—
She hath heard them all:
And even as wind and water, or the call
Of lowing herds, the murmur of them goes by.
SEMI-CHORUS.—
I know a valley in the hills,

Where echoes in the rocks and rills
Make melody; and there the cry
Of flocks is heard; and clamorous lambs
Bleat and hearken for their dams.
Whom when they hear, from far or nigh,
Swiftly along the meads they leap,
To where the milky udders swell;
And stoop, and thrust, and, nuzzling deep,
Under the heavy fleeces creep.
Then for them the world is well.

SEMI-CHORUS.—

I know a pool
Of waters clear and deep,
With wood-boughs overhung
And mosses green;
There in the cool
At noon, when song-birds sleep,
Oft have I seen
The swan amid her young.

LEADER.—

I know a bed
Fair-strewn with linen white,
Where in my sight
One that I loved lay dead.
Her hands and her feet were bound;
With myrtle her head we crowned;
Fair she lay as a bride,
And heeded us not.
Her children clung round her and cried;
And her lord, bewailing his lot,
Bowed down at her side:
And we wept, because she had died!

(ALCESTIS *rises to her feet, and stands with half-lifted arms in an attitude of prayer.*)

NURSE.—

Now thou hast touched her! Lo, the unlighted wick
Of life stands there revealed! Go, women, quick!
Bring in the children!

(*Exit one of the attendants. Behind the scene the children's voices are heard.*)

Hark, ah, hark, they cry!—
Lady, thy little ones! Oh, Heaven must die
And perish away from earth, if thou stay dumb
Looking on these!

(*Enter the two children; they run to* ALCESTIS *with outstretched arms.*)

CHILDREN.—
Mother!
NURSE.—
Oh, come, come, come!
Yea, children! 'Tis your own, returned again!
CHILDREN.—
Mother! Oh, Mother!

(ALCESTIS *stands as one hearing a far-off cry, whose sound she remembers.*)

NURSE.—
Alas! Is that cry vain?
It shall not be! Leap, child, leap to her breast!
Take hold on her with hands, give her no rest,
Cry her to pity!
CHILDREN.—
Mother!
NURSE.—
Should this not be
A call to rouse the dead? She wakes! Oh, see!
ALCESTIS.—
These were my children.
NURSE.—
By the Gods, 'tis true:
They *are* thy children, lady! What wouldst thou do?

(ALCESTIS *bends over her daughter with a strange*

look; she takes the child's hair in her hands on each side lifting it, and begins plaiting it together.)

Oh, look, look, look!

ALCESTIS.—

And thou, also, must die
Some day, fair child, and in the grave must lie.
Hark, what I tell thee: do not rise again!
Quiet is that dwelling, and therein is no pain.

NURSE.—

What hast thou said? Is not this world more bright
Than that dim realm where man can see no light,
Nor hear no sound, nor feel no touch of hands?

ALCESTIS.—

Surely the light goes forth to many lands,
And seeth all things. Yet our lord, the Sun,
In heaven stands lonely, and is known of none.

NURSE.—

Yet was not great Apollo both guard and guide,
When to this palace thou camest as a bride?
And round thy chariot's yoke such spells he cast
That lion and bear thereto stood harnessed fast.

ALCESTIS.—

I mind me of it. It was as thou hast said.
Therefore I came; and therefore hence went dead.

(*The* NURSE, *turning away with a gesture of despondency, signs to an* ATTENDANT *to remove the children.*)

NURSE.—

Bear them away! For now I hear the voice
Of singers and of minstrels that rejoice
Because the bridegroom comes. Therefore be swift,
Bring and put on the wedding robe, and lift
Again to that fair head the bridal crown!
And thou, bright Hera, favourably look down
And bless for us this hour!

(*She kneels at the feet of* ALCESTIS.)

Oh, Mistress mine,
Surely thou knowest my heart was ever thine,
To do thee service for better and not for worse!
ALCESTIS.—
Yea, yea I know it! And yet thou wast my nurse!

(*Stifling a sharp cry, the* NURSE *rises and moves away.* ALCESTIS, *robed and crowned, stands alone. The sound of music and singing draws nearer. A look of frozen horror comes over her.*)

NURSE.—
Come then! for it is time: give me thy hand!
And if the Gods are gracious to this land,
Let them work wonders now!

(*Exit* NURSE *leading* ALCESTIS, *followed by the attendant* WOMEN.)

CHORUS.—
And turning my heart from sadness
I shall have done with fear,
When the sound of a people's gladness
Grows loud in mine ear.

(*The* WOMEN'S *chorus goes out. Enter the* MEN'S *Chorus.*)

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.—
Happy is he who knoweth
The hour when his soul is blest,
Who seeth the Gods in power,
And their ways made manifest;
Ready of foot, he goeth
To the goal which giveth him rest.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS.—

So shall the breed of his race
  Be as shafts in the hand of a giant,
Happy is he, and immortal,
  Whose quiver is filled with their breath:
He, unashaméd of face,
  Stands to the foeman defiant,
Comes undismayed to the portal
  Dark with the shadow of death.

(*Enter* ADMETUS, *attended.*)

CHORUS.—
Therefore with crownéd brows,
  Thou comest rejoicing, O King;
And the Gods have wrought for thy house
  A marvellous thing.

(ADMETUS *stands before the altar, and offers incense.*)

ADMETUS.—
First unto thee, Apollo, thanks and praise
I render, who hast given me length of days,
And life to hold, and joy, that yet on earth
Mine eyes see light, which in all hearts makes mirth.

(*He offers the incense.*)

And thou, Persephone, and thou, great Head,
Holy and high, upraised amid the dead,
Lord of the Dark, to whom all flesh must bow
When Fate decrees, glad thanks I render now
For my release, and hers. To thee this debt
Freely I own.

(*Averting his face from the altar, he offers the incense.*)

And thou great Hera, who of the highest throne

Hast share in Heaven, on this once widowed bed
Look down with shining eyes, and round it shed
Sweet influences, and let the fruitful womb
Ripen with sons and daughters.

(*He offers the incense.*)

So shall no doom
Sap out the strength and standing of my race,
Nor my name be forgotten in this place,
Where I am King.

(ADMETUS *turns from the altar.*)

ATTENDANT.—
My Lord, here comes thy father!
ADMETUS.—
Let him go!
I need him not. He lived, to be my foe.

(*Enter* PHERES.)

My son, because, this day, blessing shines bright
On thee and thine, and to this home gives light
In place of darkness, therefore am I come
To wish thee joy. For when I saw the sum
Of thine affliction, straightway I did repent
The wrath I had against thee; yea, and sent
To tell thee so. Hast thou no word of peace
To offer in return?
ADMETUS.—
Yea; henceforth cease
To trouble thyself with me, or aught that's mine!
PHERES.—
Hard words: but harder that proud heart of thine.
ADMETUS.—
Hard was its need, when sharp tongue bit like steel!
PHERES.—

Yet, when the wound is salved, the flesh will heal.
ADMETUS.—
Thou, living, art the wound from which I shrink!
PHERES.—
Hadst thou thyself no stomach, but I must drink
This cup for thee?
ADMETUS.—
What use to thee was life,—
Being old?
PHERES.—
I loved it, better than thou thy wife!
Therefore she died for thee!
ADMETUS.—
Death! is thy sting
In this old serpent's tail, that he must fling
His tainted carcase across my path this day?
PHERES.—
Pass! For no longer will I bar thy way
To bliss. Go, dull thy conscience with fresh lust;
Embrace the body which thou didst cast to dust;
Feast on the flesh again, thou carrion fly!

(ADMETUS *advances threateningly towards him.*)

ATTENDANT. (*Intervening*) My lord!
ADMETUS.—
Ye Gods! let him make haste to die,
For while he lives corruption taints this earth!
PHERES.—
My years are with me; and I know their worth,
Better than thou knowest thine.

(*Exit* PHERES.)

ATTENDANT.—
Now is my lord
Ready? It is the hour.
ADMETUS.—
Yea, let the word

Be given. Call in the women!

(*The* MINSTRELS *clash their cymbals.*)

ATTENDANT.—
Yonder they come.

(*Two* ATTENDANTS *enter with torches. They draw back the curtains from the doors, and stand to right and left of the bed. Enter the* NURSE *from doorway to right, carrying a cup. Then from the left comes in the bridal procession. In rigid silence the women walk two and two, dropping sprays of myrtle from folded napkins which they carry between them. The movement is sad and full of solemnity, sacrificial in character. They pass from left to right across the stage, descend and pass out.* ALCESTIS, *veiled, comes last, supported by two women; as she halts at left-center they fall back leaving her alone.*)

ADMETUS.—
Therefore bid all go forth! Close and make dumb
These doors.

LEADER.—
And may the eyes of Heaven look down
And bless this bridal! Hail to thee, thou crown
Of womanhood. Honour is thine this day,
And fame for ever!

(*The* MEN'S *Chorus lift their hands in salutation to* ALCESTIS *as they pass out. Exeunt. The* NURSE *brings the cup to* ADMETUS; *he takes it and drinks. She brings the cup to* ALCESTIS. *The two* ATTENDANTS *lift up and lay back her veil. The* NURSE *offers the cup; her hands do not take hold; with shut eyes she drinks. The* NURSE *goes out, followed by the two* ATTENDANTS, *who draw the curtains after them.*)

ADMETUS.—
Blessing and peace be thine, O form which died,
And comest more fair to be my second bride!
For now thou shinest upon me like a star!
ALCESTIS.—
I give thee greeting, having journeyed far.
ADMETUS.—
Mine, or was thine the journey, wouldst thou say?
ALCESTIS.—
We have both journeyed; mine was the longer way.
ADMETUS.—
Bitter for thee it was to part from breath!
ALCESTIS.—
Life filled mine eyes; I had not looked on death.
ADMETUS.—
What hast thou now of hidden things to tell?
ALCESTIS.—
Love knows not life till it know death as well.
ADMETUS.—
Where foundst thou—love?
ALCESTIS.—
Not where the dead lie bound,
Nor here on earth one lover have I found.
ADMETUS.—
No lover, dost thou tell me? By this head,
I am thy lover. I swear it!
ALCESTIS.—
Thou hast said.
ADMETUS.—
Did not I choose thee first of all on earth?
ALCESTIS.—
The doom of God lay on me from my birth.
ADMETUS.—
Sweet was our bridal-chamber filled by thee!
ALCESTIS.—
The night was dark; I had not eyes to see.
ADMETUS.—
Reaching my arms I snatch thee back from fate.
ALCESTIS.—

In one small life the little need seems great.
ADMETUS.—
Hadst thou no longing, then, to live again?
ALCESTIS.—
And not to die: therewith I strove in vain.
ADMETUS.—
But having died, was there no looking back?
ALCESTIS.—
I looked, and lo, the doors of life were black.
ADMETUS.—
Didst thou not love the children of thy womb?
ALCESTIS.—
They still were mine when I was in the tomb.
ADMETUS.—
Home hungered for thee, and the marriage-bed
Where thou wast fruitful.
ALCESTIS.—
And where I lay dead,
Having borne all!
ADMETUS.—
What means that stricken cry?
Found'st thou no bliss?
ALCESTIS.—
Yea, bliss enough to die
When thou didst ask it of me, O my lord!
Ofttimes he might have slain me with his sword:
Yet was I spared to die another death.
ADMETUS.—
Breathe not upon the past such bitter breath!
Great was the need, thou knowest, I had of thee!
ALCESTIS.—
A greater need befell: I set thee free.
ADMETUS.—
Was it not love which took thee to the tomb?
ALCESTIS.—
Thrice thou hadst planted life within my womb.
ADMETUS.—
Yea, thou hast given me sons which shall be men.
ALCESTIS.—

And thrice I could have died; but did not then.
ADMETUS.—
What darker word is this that thou dost say?
ALCESTIS.—
Lo, at thy bidding, I have looked on day
And darkness, life and death; thy hand holds all.
ADMETUS.—
Therefore, I hold thee still: yea, and will call
Joy back to thee again!
ALCESTIS.—
My joy I gave
Before I died; nor took it to the grave;
Nor brought it thence.
ADMETUS.—
Say, then, where dwells it now?
ALCESTIS.—
In thee, if thou be joyful; but if thou
Hast not found joy, then was all given in vain.
ADMETUS.—
Soon from thy body joy shall spring again,
Yielding fresh life.
ALCESTIS.—
So Earth must give her yield
Unto the hand of him who ploughs the field.
ADMETUS.—
And binds the sheaves!

(*He clasps her in his arms.*)

Come, come, oh, quick Desire,
Kindle within this heart its wonted fire!
ALCESTIS.—
My flesh is thine: the life therein my own.
ADMETUS.—
To me, thy lover, turn not this heart of stone!
Greater my love for thee than e'er before!
ALCESTIS.—
Since it is greater, dost thou ask for more?
ADMETUS.—

Yea, for I thirst! Let the Gods give thee bliss!

ALCESTIS.—

What God in heaven or hell shall grant me this?

ADMETUS.—

Ask of Apollo: he that made thee mine!

ALCESTIS.—

Of that vine-treading thou hast drunk the wine.

ADMETUS.—

Give me to drink again! Come! for I call!

ALCESTIS.—

Again thou askest of me, and I give—all.

(*Falling back in his arms, she dies.*)

ADMETUS.—

Now art thou mine! O bride of every sense!

(*He bears her to the bed.*)

Ah, what cold horror's this? Breath has gone hence!
Warmth, touch, sight, hearing! Help! Lo, unto earth
Where God sent blessing, a curse hath sprung to birth!
Apollo, thy dart hath slain me!

(*Enter* NURSE.)

NURSE.—

What means that cry?

ADMETUS.—

She is dead! She is dead! Clasping, I felt her die!

NURSE.—

Oh, woe is me, my mistress! Oh, my lord!

ADMETUS.—

Yea, deep into my breast she thrust a sword,
So much she hated me!

NURSE.—

Oh, woe, woe, woe!

ADMETUS.—
Death won her love, and Life became her foe!

(*He covers his face with his robe.*)

NURSE.—
O Child, is it I that have slain thee?
For surely thy heart I read,
And saw how thy face was set.
But mine were the hands to chain thee
To the life that thou wouldst forget,
And to bring thee back from the dead.

(*While she is speaking, others enter: the* WOMEN'S CHORUS, *the* ATTENDANTS, *and two* CHILDREN. *They stand awe-struck looking on.*)

NURSE.—
I knew thy heart,
Patient and tender; no grief
Failed ever to touch thee; no smart,
But with thee found relief.
But thou hadst a grief unknown:
Silently, down to the grave, thou hast borne it alone.
ADMETUS.—
Lift up your voices and cry! O women, shall she not wake?
CHORUS.—
Wake, mistress, awake!
ADMETUS.—
She lived, she rose, she returned from the dead, having died for my sake.
CHORUS.—
For his sake!
For our sake!
ADMETUS.—
Earth had not stained her: her body was sweet, and her form
Was fair to the eyes!

CHORUS.—
Oh, the eyes, the eyes!
ADMETUS.—
She lay on my breast, she was warm
To my touch, and the prize
Was mine!
CHORUS.—
The prize! ah, the prize!
ADMETUS.—
Oh, God, have the years to give
Naught but this double death,
Of the lips that did once so live,
And were twice so parted from breath?
CHORUS.—
Oh, Lady, awake, return! Put off this showing
Of death! Repent of thy going!
Oh, Mother, return!

(*Enter* PHERES.)

PHERES.—
Fools! Why do ye call on the dead
Who hear not? Never again
Shall voices burden that ear.
Death untasted is feared; but tasted is sweet,
And the heart where that honey hath lain
Feels hunger no more.
Yea, cover the feet that walk not;
Yea, cover the eyes!
Night for me is not yet; but there like a lover he lies.
Look, there is peace in that breast,
And her face is a star.
Old of foot, to the grave without rest
I go: but the journey is far.

(*Exit* PHERES.)

ADMETUS.—
In the heart that my heart would cherish,

The gift of the Gods wrought scorn.
She is gone from me. Let the day perish
Wherein I was born!
CHORUS.—
Death comes early or late;
And surely the dead are blest.
But I must carry the weight
Of my years to a far-off grave,
Lying I know not where.
Yonder, to cover mine eyes,
Grass grows, and the green leaves wave;
And the gold of the sun lies there,
All bright and at rest.

CURTAIN.